



CHRISTIAN JOY



St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † April 2015

ISSUE: What is Christian joy?

RESPONSE: Pope Paul VI teaches that Christian joy “consists in the human spirit’s finding repose and a deep satisfaction in the possession of the Triune God, known by faith and loved with the charity that comes from Him.”

DISCUSSION: A man of sorrows like his master, St. Paul was no stranger to suffering (see 2 Cor. 11:24–28). But St. Paul was also a man of joy. “With all our affliction, I am overjoyed” (2 Cor. 7:4). He exhorted his fellow Christians to be joyful: “Rejoice always” (1 Thess. 5:16); “rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4).

What is this joy of which St. Paul speaks—the joy he expects all of Christ’s followers to have? How do we partake of it? How is Christian joy related to what we commonly speak of as joy?

To answer these questions, Pope Paul VI wrote an apostolic exhortation on Christian joy (*Gaudete in Domino*) that remains the most extensive magisterial discussion of the topic.[1] The document was written in preparation for Pentecost during the holy year of 1975, and in it the Pontiff offers timely advice to various groups to help them benefit from the graces of the year. While much of the document, then, is concerned with the pastoral needs of the 1970s, the doctrinal heart of *Gaudete in Domino*, upon which this FAITH FACT is based, is timeless.

Natural Joy

Man is hardwired for joy, as it were: God, in creating us, has disposed us to experience joy. Drawing upon St. Thomas Aquinas, Pope Paul VI describes joy as the most noble expression of happiness and defines it as “‘happiness’ in the strict sense, when man, on the level of his higher faculties, finds his peace and satisfaction in the possession of a known and loved good.”[2] Man finds joy in the world, which God created good, and in friendship with other men, whom God created in His image and likeness. Moreover, the man of natural virtue finds joy in the worship of the God as the Supreme Good.

Even as man desires joy, he knows it is fragile and imperfect. Although men of all times have known the imperfection of natural joy, the modern world is marked by a particularly acute lack of it. Some areas of the world experience the miseries of starvation and war; in other areas, modernity “has succeeded in multiplying the opportunities for pleasure, but it has great difficulty in generating joy. For joy comes from another source. It is spiritual. Money, comfort, hygiene and material security are often not lacking; and yet boredom, depression and sadness unhappily remain the lot of many. These feelings sometimes go as far as anguish and despair, which apparent carefreeness, the frenzies of present good fortune and artificial paradises cannot assuage.”

Pope Paul VI proposes three remedies to the pervasive lack of natural joy in today’s world—remedies that are as timely now as they were three decades ago.

First, Pope Paul reminds men of the duty to love their neighbor and exhorts them to work together “to secure at least a minimum of relief, well-being, security and justice, necessary for happiness, for the many peoples deprived of them.” Such solidarity toward those in need can bring joy both to those who give and to those who receive.

Second, he observes that people need to learn again “how to savor in a simple way the many human joys that the Creator places in our path.” These natural joys include “the elating joy of existence and of life; the joy of chaste and sanctified love; the peaceful joy of nature and silence; the sometimes austere joy of work well done; the joy and satisfaction of duty performed; the transparent joy of purity, service and sharing; the demanding joy of sacrifice.” Christians cannot disdain these natural joys, for “Christian joy presupposes a person capable of natural joy.”

Third, lamenting the sadness of nonbelievers in our desacralized world, he calls upon those who do not know God to seek Him. Ignorant of the joyful knowledge that they tend towards God as their Last End and are linked to Him by a bond stronger than death, nonbelievers do not know the meaning of their lives. Only by leaving behind sin and seeking the God for whom they are made can men experience joy. While fallen human nature cannot bring about this transformation, divine revelation can enlighten unbelievers’ minds, and grace can touch their hearts, so that they can attain natural joy and enter the threshold of Christian joy.

The Joy of Christ

“In essence,” writes Pope Paul VI, this “Christian joy is the spiritual sharing in the unfathomable joy, both divine and human, which is in the heart of Jesus Christ glorified.”

Communicating Himself to man gradually, God began to announce Christian joy in the Old Testament.[3] Abraham rejoiced to see Christ’s day and experienced its “prophetic first fruits” in the birth, offering, and restoration of his son Isaac. Again and again, Israel experienced “liberation and restoration (at least foretold), having its origin in the merciful love of God for His beloved people, on whose behalf He accomplishes, by pure grace and miraculous power, the promises of the Covenant.” The joy of the Passover and the liberation from exile, the joy sung by the Psalmist, the joy of the new Jerusalem promised to the prophets, and the divine-human nuptial joy prophesied in Isaiah all find their fulfillment in Christ’s “new Pasch and new Exodus . . . from the figurative Jerusalem here below to the Jerusalem above.”

With the Incarnation of the Son of God in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, Christian joy entered the world. Soon after the Annunciation, St. John the Baptist leaped for joy in his mother’s womb, and Mary rejoiced in God her Savior (Lk. 1:44, 47). On Christmas night, the angel announced to the shepherds “good news of a great joy which will come to all the people” (Lk. 2:10). As Jesus began His public ministry, St. John the Baptist rejoiced greatly at the Bridegroom’s voice (Jn. 3:29). During His public life, “all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him” (Lk. 13:17).

As perfect man, Our Lord “has manifestly known, appreciated, and celebrated a whole range of human joys,” which He experienced with gratitude:

He admires the birds of heaven, the lilies of the field. He immediately grasps God’s attitude towards creation at the dawn of history. He willingly extols the joy of the sower and the harvester, the joy of the man who finds a hidden treasure, the joy of the shepherd who recovers his sheep or of the woman who finds her lost coin, the joy of those invited to the feast, the joy of a marriage celebration, the joy of the father who embraces his son returning from a prodigal life, and the joy of the woman who has just brought her child into the world. For Jesus, these joys are real because for Him they are the signs of the spiritual joys of the kingdom of God. . . . His happiness is above all to see the Word accepted, the possessed delivered, a sinful woman or a publican like Zacchaeus converted, a widow taking from her poverty and giving. He even exults with joy when He states that the little ones have the revelation of the kingdom which remains hidden from the wise and able.

Following Our Lord's example, Christians are called to be thankful to God for the human joys He grants them.

The core of Jesus' joy, however, is deeper than gratitude for human joys: It is His constant awareness, from the moment of the Incarnation, "of the inexpressible love by which He knows that He is loved by His Father" (see Lk. 3:22; Jn. 10:15, 14:10, 16:32, 17:10, 17:24). Jesus returns the Father's love with an immense love that manifests itself in filial service and obedience (see Jn. 4:34, 8:29, 10:17, 14:31).

In His human soul, Jesus knows with joy that the Father loves Him, and with joy He loves the Father in return. This mutual, joyful love offers us a glimpse into the ineffable relations between the Persons of the Blessed Trinity. "Here there is an uncommunicable relationship of love which is identified with His existence as the Son and which is the secret of the life of the Trinity: the Father is seen here as the one, who gives Himself to the Son, without reserve and without ceasing, in a burst of joyful generosity, and the Son is seen as He who gives Himself in the same way to the Father, in a burst of joyful gratitude, in the Holy Spirit."

The path of joyful love took Jesus to the Cross. He accepted death "in order to eradicate from man's heart the sins of self-sufficiency and to manifest to the Father a complete filial obedience." If the Crucifixion manifests on earth the Son's eternal, joyful self-giving to the Father, then the Resurrection manifests on earth the Father's eternal, joyful self-giving to the Son, for the Resurrection "is the proof of the Father's fidelity. . . . Henceforth, Jesus is living forever in the glory of the Father, and this is why the disciples were confirmed in an ineradicable joy when they saw the Lord on Easter evening."

The Joy of Christians

Jesus wants His disciples to participate in this Trinitarian joy. On Holy Thursday evening, He prayed "that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves" (Jn. 17:13). This participation in divine joy, which begins on earth, "requires a total confidence in the Father and in the Son, and a preference given to the kingdom." Christian joy is "a steep road" that begins with the Beatitudes, is assisted by frequent Confession, and is ever illumined by the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Christians suffer as they trod, but "in the joyful announcement of the resurrection, even man's suffering finds itself transformed, while the fullness of joy springs from the victory of the Crucified, from His pierced heart and His glorified body. This victory enlightens the darkness of souls."

The Risen Christ brings joy to His people through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Paschal joy . . . is the joy of the new presence of the Risen Christ dispensing to His own the Holy Spirit, so that He may dwell with them. The Holy Spirit is given to the Church as the inexhaustible principle of her joy as the bride of the glorified Christ. He recalls to her mind, through the ministry of grace and truth exercised by the successors of the apostles, the very teaching of the Lord. The Holy Spirit stirs up in the Church divine life and the apostolate. . . . Thus the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son and is their living mutual love, is henceforth communicated to the People of the New Covenant, and to each soul ready for His secret action.

The Holy Spirit makes man's heart a home for the Blessed Trinity and "raises up therein a filial prayer that springs forth from the depths of the soul and is expressed in praise, thanksgiving, reparation and supplication. Then we can experience joy which is properly spiritual, the joy which is a fruit of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17, Gal. 5:22).

This joy is ecclesial. It is “a common joy, truly supernatural, a gift of the Spirit of unity and love, which is not possible in truth except where the preaching of the faith is accepted in its entirety, according to the apostolic norm.”

Earlier in the apostolic exhortation, Pope Paul VI had defined joy in general as “‘happiness’ in the strict sense, when man, on the level of his higher faculties, finds his peace and satisfaction in the possession of a known and loved good.” He now defines Christian joy as that particular joy which “consists in the human spirit’s finding repose and a deep satisfaction in the possession of the Triune God, known by faith and loved with the charity that comes from Him.”

This Christian joy, a fruit of the Holy Spirit, leaves its mark upon all the virtues and transfigures our human joys. “Here below this joy will always include to a certain extent the painful trial of a woman in travail . . . while the world parades its gloating satisfaction,” for Christians who freely follow the Crucified Lord will suffer persecution. “But the disciples’ sadness, which is according to God and not according to the world, will be promptly changed into a spiritual joy that no one will be able to take away from them” (see Jn. 16:20-22). The disciple “always remains, in his inmost being, in joy, because he is in communion with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

The Joy of the Saints

For two millennia, Christian joy has been palpable in the lives of the saints, especially in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, invoked by the Church as the cause of our joy. “Open in an unlimited degree to the joy of the Resurrection” as she was to the sorrow of the Crucifixion, “she sums up in herself all joys; she lives the perfect joy promised to the Church.” After Mary, the purest joy is found in the innumerable martyrs who were granted the grace to long for their Lord in the midst of their torments.

Martyrdom is not the only path to Christian joy, for the Holy Spirit inspires others to die to themselves so that they may experience the joy of the Resurrection. Numerous spiritual masters have shown Christians the joy of living in God’s love.[4]

Three saints, however, stand out as spiritual masters whose teaching and example are particularly important today: St. Francis of Assisi, who found joy in the midst of poverty; St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who found joy in spiritual abandonment; and St. Maximilian Kolbe, who found joy in the midst of an earthly hell.

The saints, like all Christians, found strength to meet the demands of joy in the Holy Eucharist, “the first fruits of eschatological joy.” The Eucharist reminds us that “joy is the result of a human-divine communion, and aspires to a communion ever more universal.”

Let them not be afraid to insist time and time again on the need for baptized Christians to be faithful to the Sunday celebration, in joy, of the Eucharist. How could they neglect this encounter, this banquet which Christ prepares for us in His love? . . . This is the culmination here below of the alliance of love between God and His people: the sign and source of Christian joy, the preparation for the eternal feast.

[1] Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation on Christian Joy *Gaudete in Domino* (May 9, 1975). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this FAITH FACT are from *Gaudete in Domino*.

[2] Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q.31, a.3.

[3] Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 53.

[4] Pope Paul mentions Origen and Nicholas Cabasilas in the East and Sts. Augustine, Bernard, Dominic, Ignatius Loyola, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales, and John Bosco in the West.